

**Remarks of Ambassador Harry K. Thomas, Jr.,
At the Fourth Development Forum
Of the Philippine Ambassadors Foundation, Inc.
Tuesday, September 14, 2010**

Ambassador Yuchengco, Ambassador Laurel, Ambassadors of the Republic of the Philippines... Good afternoon, *magandang tanghali sa inyong lahat*.

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. It is an honor to be in the company of so many distinguished representatives of one of America's key allies. I feel privileged to share with you my perspective on the United States' relationship with the Philippines, and I look forward to hearing your views during the open forum.

As many of you know, President Aquino will travel in the next week to participate in the United Nations General Assembly, his first appearance on the global stage as President of the Philippines. This is an occasion for him to outline the role he expects the Philippines to play in world affairs, and like many of my ambassadorial colleagues I am eager to hear his speech.

From the United States' perspective, one of the most important events during President Aquino's visit will be the summit meeting between President Obama and the leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The Philippines, as our dialogue partner with ASEAN, has been essential to the process of organizing this summit, and we are grateful for that leadership. It demonstrates the key role the Philippines plays in ASEAN, as well as the importance of ASEAN in President Aquino's agenda.

The United States has welcomed the strengthening of ties among Southeast Asian countries that ASEAN both reflects and promotes. As a close partner of ASEAN and of many of its member states, the United States shares ASEAN's goal of strengthening security and prosperity and increasing economic opportunity in the region. We support the collaborative

processes that ASEAN states have established, and look forward to increasing our engagement where appropriate.

President Aquino of course has a full agenda of meetings and engagements related to the United Nations, but since the UN General Assembly takes place in New York we hope to win some time on his schedule for a few bilateral events. One of the key bilateral developments during your President's visit will be the signing of a Millennium Challenge Corporation, or MCC, compact. As many of you know, this compact will provide four hundred and thirty four million dollars of assistance to the Philippines. This assistance will support three main projects: first, the construction of a road all around the island of Samar. I haven't had the opportunity to visit Samar yet, but they tell me that, if I go, I should bring a four-wheel drive, several spare tires, and a back and neck brace. A well-constructed road can make a real difference in people's lives. This road will allow better access to markets for Samar's entrepreneurs, allow food and merchandise to reach Samar's consumers more quickly and at a lower cost, and allow the Philippine government better access to the people there who need better education, health care, and security.

The second project will build on and expand a successful project funded by the World Bank known as KALAHI CIDDs. In this project, community members and local government officials at the *barangay* and municipal level select, design, and implement small-scale infrastructure or livelihood projects that address their most pressing needs. It's true what they say, that a little goes a long way when it comes to community development, so we are very excited by this program.

The third project will help the Bureau of Internal Revenue improve its management of tax revenue. The objective is to increase revenue by stopping "leaks" in the system, so that the

government has enough funding to address the country's needs in education, health care, infrastructure, and security.

All of these projects will be defined and implemented in full partnership with the Philippine government and the Filipino people. Our partners – meaning you, your families, your business colleagues, your neighbors – are the ones who will ultimately make these projects successful. When hard-working, dedicated Filipinos agree to work together for the common good, many great things are possible.

We are proud to be partners in these important endeavors that directly support the priorities President Aquino has expressed.

The Millennium Challenge program is one way we are working to improve our shared prosperity but let me highlight a few others. Later this week I will be leading a delegation of 14 U.S. businesses to Cagayan de Oro, where they will explore opportunities with commercial enterprises in Mindanao. Next week we will also welcome Ambassador Kurt Tong to Manila, who is our special representative on Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, because we need to look at economic opportunities regionally as well as locally. And in the months ahead I can promise you we will be looking for new ways to expand trade, promote shared economic growth, and develop creative enterprises that are win-wins for both our nations.

President Aquino's travel to the United Nations and our important economic ties reflect global opportunities. But we face global challenges as well. Many of you may have noticed that, since my arrival in the Philippines, I have frequently spoken publicly of my government's desire to work with the Philippines to end the scourge of trafficking in persons. Trafficking – in which people are trapped in unfair or inhumane conditions, whether in a sweatshop or in a brothel – is one of the most despicable practices in the world today. It is a modern-day form of

slavery, and I am proud that my government stands staunchly against this practice, although we have much work to do to confront it even within our own borders. I have been grateful to find that many Filipinos understand the threat that trafficking syndicates pose, and many officials are eager to take up the fight by prosecuting and punishing those who break the law.

Clearly, there is a link between economic conditions and the susceptibility of innocent people to trafficking. Most trafficking victims are people simply looking for ways to improve their own lives or to provide for other members of their families. Their desperation makes it easy for them to be tricked and then trapped in appalling conditions. Trafficking syndicates find it easier to carry out their criminal enterprise when people in positions of authority also face hardship and can be tempted into looking the other way.

Sometimes when we talk about economic growth or improved governance, the terms can seem dry and abstract. But when you consider that they translate to children living in healthy conditions, enjoying a quality education, and growing up to enjoy equal opportunities to contribute to their nation, then the benefits are immediately clear.

I consider myself deeply fortunate to come to the Philippines at a time of optimism and determination. Optimism that the Philippines has a bright future ahead, and determination to work hard to realize that future. President Aquino will stand before the world at the United Nations, but he won't stand alone. The millions of Filipinos who cast their ballots for him will stand there with him, endorsing his vision and committing to the change he has promised to deliver with their help.

President Aquino has defined three key priorities for his administration – improving the quality and transparency of government, creating new opportunities for Filipinos through better health and education, and creating jobs and bringing investment to increase prosperity. These

are important goals and necessary steps. It will require hard work, commitment and perseverance to achieve them. I can assure you that, as President Aquino lays out his vision for the Philippines, we will remain a very engaged and supportive partner. Our shared history, common values, and deep friendship remain the three pillars of a strong relationship based on mutual respect and trust. Let's keep in mind as well that the United States hosts the largest single concentration of Filipinos outside these 7000 islands, and that's a very important aspect of our continued engagement, one that underpins nearly everything we do together.

Thank you very much for your attention and for the work you do on behalf of your country. I would welcome an opportunity to hear your views and to address any questions you may have.